

## Review – Friends With Benefits

Written by Frédéric Grare

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### **Friends With Benefits: The India-US Story**

**By Seema Sirohi**

**Harper Collins, 2023**

*Friends with Benefits: The India-US Story*, from Indian journalist Seema Sirohi, is part historical book, part journalistic memoir. It narrates the remarkable evolution of the US-India relationship — from antagonistic to partners — under five US presidents and three Indian Prime Ministers. With *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies*, published in 1994, Dennis Kux, a retired US diplomat, had written a history of the complex and difficult relationship between the two countries. He had highlighted the anomaly of the far too often confrontational character of their interactions during nine successive US presidents, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to George Bush. Seema Sirohi starts where he left off and chronicles the reversing evolution of their relationship from Bill Clinton to Joe Biden.

India emerged from the Cold War on the wrong side of history but determined to change course and get closer to the US. It took a little longer for Washington to feel the change and start behaving accordingly. More than any other, perhaps, the presidency of Bill Clinton epitomises the transformation of US policy vis-à-vis India. The relationship went from overtly hostile, to an enthusiastic rapprochement. The author makes abundantly clear, though, that India's policy changed much less than the US one. For the entirety of Bill Clinton's first stint in office and most of his second, the issues of Pakistan and non-proliferation drove the relationship. US misunderstanding of the South Asian political and security dynamic, Cold War reminiscence of past alliances, and very effective lobbying on the part of Pakistan, had made the resolution of the Kashmir issue the focus of US policy in South Asia.

Indian nuclear tests in 1998, soon followed by Pakistan's, exacerbated the tensions. Sanctions on India were brutal. The US refusal to consider, against all evidence, the Pakistan-China nuclear collusion. Considerations about China's economy played a larger role than Pakistan in that state of affairs, even though the quality of Islamabad's diplomacy played its part. It took no less than the Kargil war in 1999 for Bill Clinton to change course and reconsider US relations with both Pakistan and India. Kargil opened many American eyes to a broader engagement with an India whose economy was slowly but effectively becoming more significant and therefore attractive. The nuclear test themselves had nevertheless convinced the US administration that India could no longer be ignored. A subsequent series of discussions between Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh paved the way for the rapprochement. According to Sirohi, the China issue was also becoming more prominent but somewhat ambivalent, as the US was absorbed by Clinton's willingness to partner economically with Beijing, which was soon to join the WTO.

The rapprochement first made its significance felt in 2000, at the turn of the century, with the first visit of a US President to India since Jimmy Carter. India's foreign policy was entering a new era. It was, however, under a new President, George W. Bush, that the relationship blossomed, greatly helped, during the first term, by Pakistan's sponsored terrorism and the September 11 attacks against the US which suddenly and dramatically increased the US convergence of interest with India. The gradual de-hyphenation operated by the US administration between its Pakistan and India policies, which was formally announced in 2005 but began during Bush's first term, allowed for more ambitious policies, articulated around the idea that India could play a bigger role in the emerging twenty first century.

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These policies materialised during Bush's second term with the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement. Announced in 2005, it led to a formidable administrative battle in Washington which reversed, for India alone, decades of non-proliferation policies, leading to a complete change of paradigm in the relationship. Even so, it took a lot of persuasion to convince the Indian leaders to sign off. The relationship emerged transformed from the Bush era, firmly anchored in new and spectacular popular support in both countries. The perspective proposed by Seema Sirohi here is particularly reflective of India's erstwhile perspective, one of the very few countries where George Bush was still popular despite the Iraq War.

By contrast, Sirohi presents the relationship under Barack Obama as experiencing a step backward. Soon after the election of Obama, India-US relations seemed to have returned to the bad old days. The initial rhetoric of the administration returned to a Pakistan friendly narrative in Washington, trade difficulties multiplied, and scandals flourished. Individual factors also played a role, starting with the complex and strong personalities of actors such as Richard Holbrooke and John Kerry, whose undeniable talents seemed to be matched by an equal ignorance of South Asian realities. Meanwhile, despite his personal sympathy for Manmohan Singh, Barack Obama did not really invest in the relationship with India. With the ascent of Narendra Modi to power, something that the author welcomes, a new actor emerged, deeply aware of his country's structural weaknesses but determined to play the US system to his own advantage to help change the situation. Once again, China helped preserve the relationship. Military cooperation progressed, albeit centred on the issue of Beijing.

If the Obama presidency was an era of relative stagnation for the India-US relationship, things were about to change in a quite bizarre way. In the succession of US presidents and their relationships with India, as presented by Sirohi, Donald Trump is a paradox. His personal mindset was probably the most alien from — if not radically opposed to — anything India could imagine. Yet, his presidency was generally considered positive for the relationship with India. New Delhi was served by the circumstances, smart diplomacy, and the cooperation of a few knowledgeable people in the US administration. As opposed to the situation which prevailed under Clinton, the Pakistani factor, now aggravated by Afghanistan, was no longer mitigated by the need to massage China into joining the WTO. On the contrary, the tariff war with Beijing only made the latter's alliance with Pakistan, as well as the latter's duplicity in Afghanistan, more difficult to swallow. Trump, of course could not refrain from repeatedly attacking India on its tariff policy. However, smart and knowledgeable advisors in the NSC were able to compensate for the unsophisticated and ill-thought-out eruptions of the US president while Indian diplomats cunningly used Trump's family- and romantic-ties to influence him. Thus, the Trump presidency turned out to be a net benefit for India.

As Joe Biden's first term is nearing its end, however, the relationship seems to have plateaued. India and the United States are estranged no more. The relationship does not even compare to the situation which prevailed at the beginning of the Clinton era. Yet, it remains somehow uncertain. Past misunderstandings have disappeared, but new difficulties have emerged. While the two countries still pat themselves on the back and underline their democratic convergence, current Indian political trends increasingly make India's friends uneasy. As asserted by the author, "the question of shared values and human rights could create new stresses" (p.461). Strategic convergence over China remains the main glue between the two countries, but political dynamics on either side could strain the relationship once again.

*Friends with Benefits* offers interesting insights into New Delhi's diplomacy. Indian diplomats and politicians have learned to play the US political system much faster than their US counterparts have the Indian one. The book highlights the malleability of a US political system, constantly torn between competing interest groups and influences, and unclear about the reality of a world it pretends to police. But it also underlines the defining role of US presidents in foreign policy. The relationship with India changed under Clinton and flourished under Bush because both men were personally involved and unusually active. It plateaued under their successors because they demonstrated a relative lack of personal interest despite a public appearance to the contrary.

The book also provides a most accurate description of Narendra Modi's foreign policy. In substance, the Indian Prime Minister is marching resolutely in the footsteps of his predecessors, who largely defined the contours of India's foreign policy after 1992. But he has also proven capable of remarkably innovative tactics while adroitly playing the US system and its leadership. In the process, he managed to blur the perception of his regime, whose values are

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questionable, with a resolutely modern narrative on economy, technology and strategic proximity to the US.

For those interested in the history of the bilateral relationship, *Friends with Benefits: The India-US Story* is a well of information, and is full of insights and anecdotes. Sirohi's perception and understanding, enthusiasm, disillusion and occasional outrage can be felt throughout the book. Yet, they never take precedence over a history to which she was a witness but which was also her history. However, biases are not totally absent either. The narration of the US-India history is written from an Indian perspective, and the author does not always hide her inclinations. The book would have been better served by a larger and deeper contextualisation. The constraints an established global superpower inevitably differ from those of a then-emerging power, but were not sufficiently addressed. This lack of objectivity — which should not be confused with a lack of honesty — does, however, add to the interest of the book. The author's discreet but constant presence and her sense of humour make it, moreover, an effortless and pleasant read. In the long litany of publications on India and the United States, *Friends with Benefits: The India-US Story* stands out. It is, by all accounts, a must-read.

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Dr. Frédéric Grare is Senior Research Fellow at the National Security College in Canberra, Associate Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His last two books were: *India Turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry* (2017) and *The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region*, co-written with Jean-Loup Samaan, (2022).